Materials Production in EFL: A Team Process

By Lindsay Miller

Nowadays, there is a plethora of ELT textbooks on the market. There are books aimed at all sorts of learners, from school pupils to engineers. However, the cry can still be heard from staff rooms about the unsuitability of some textbooks, and teachers bemoan the fact that they spend a lot of their time adapting materials.

But there is nothing wrong in adapting textbooks. As part of the teacher-development process, material adaptation should be encouraged. With a little effort and the use of personal computers, the process of producing professional looking, customized teaching materials is now within the capacity of many ESL/EFL teachers.

Block (1991) gives teachers three good reasons for preparing their own materials:

1. Their materials may have a local context to allow learners to focus on language-use rather than battling with strange contexts;
2. Materials produced in-house can be easily updated;
3. Students appreciate the personal touch of their teacher in materials produced specifically for them.

This paper describes, through my own experience at a post secondary institute, how in-house materials can become a professional, customized textbook.

Situation

The English Department at City University of Hong Kong services most other departments within the institution. Students in the Engineering Department need English to help them through their English medium degree course. They range in proficiency from low-intermediate to low advanced. One need is the reading skill--especially the ability to read lengthy articles from journals and professional magazines. Notetaking and the ability to take part in discussions are also skills these students need to develop. But since there was no appropriate existing textbook, we decided to produce materials suitable to our students' specific needs.

Process

The task of producing the textbook was divided among several persons, and the process we went through can be summarized as follows:

Stage 1: Identify the problem you have in using the existing materials and determine what you think would be useful for your students.

Stage 2: Set up a meeting with colleagues who are interested in materials writing and brainstorm the possible types of materials you could produce. Consider both the students' needs, and the demands of the project:

- How much time is available?
- Do you have access to a computer?
- How will the workload be divided?
- Can you involve the students in helping you collect materials?

By the end of this meeting you should have a good idea of what you are going to try to produce and the time-frame within which you will work.

Stage 3: Once you have a clear idea of what you want to produce, divide up the workload. Each author should be responsible for producing a number of units, and one person should serve as editor to coordinate the materials.

Stage 4: After the authors have produced draft materials, arrange another meeting to start mapping out what the book will look like. If any copyrighted materials are to be used, the editor should write to the publishers to ask for permission to reproduce the articles. The publishers of magazines, journals, and newspapers generally give permission (sometimes with a fee) to educational institutes to reproduce copyrighted material. You should send a letter and a photocopy of the article you wish to use to the rights holder and allow four to six weeks for reply. If you are going to adapt the material, include a copy of your adaptation as well.

Stage 5: The authors should have a deadline for producing their materials, and several additional meetings should be arranged by the editor to monitor progress.

Stage 6: As the material is being produced, one person has to be responsible for page-setting and formatting the units. This requires the use of a computer. If you are able to use one of the desktop publishing software packages such as *Pagemaker* or *Ventura* , so much the better. If not, then any ordinary word processing software will do. When you are page setting, do not aim too high in the design of the layout. Simple, clear page layouts are less time-consuming to produce and easier for the students to follow.

Stage 7: Once the material is starting to take shape, pilot it with some of your students. Pilot the material in stages so that you can include ideas from the students in later units.

Stage 8: The editor should arrange another meeting to review and revise the material. Decide what worked well and what did not and make the appropriate changes.

Stage 9: The editor should collect all the revised material and organize it according to the way it will be presented in the book. A final meeting should be held to proofread all the material. This is best done by people who have not written the material. They should read the material carefully and try doing the exercises to see if there are any flaws.

Stage 10: A cover has to be designed and a contents page, introduction and acknowledgments section written. The cover should include the book's title, the names of the authors, and a suitable graphic; the contents page lists the units in the book; the introduction briefly describes the nature of the text; and the acknowledgments page mentions everyone, apart from the authors, who helped produce the book, as well as listing the permissions received for any copyrighted material used in the text. The material is then either photocopied or sent to printers for reproduction, collating, and binding.

Concluson

In our situation, six people were involved in the production: an editor/lead author, three additional authors, a graphics artist, and a reproduction/graphics manager. In other situations, fewer people may be needed, but it is essential to have someone perform the following functions:

- organizing and monitoring the materials writing process;
- editing the text;
- typesetting the pages using desktop publishing or word processing software;
- proofreading the final copy prior to reproduction.

The advantages of producing our own materials were numerous mainly because the authors knew for whom they were writing and how the materials would complement the students' other studies. Through producing our own materials, we became more aware of our teaching methodology. We also felt we had developed professionally and no longer looked at material writing as something outside our abilities.

By using the process of needs analysis, syllabus design, feedback, evaluation, and adjustment (after Zombory-Moldovan 1989), we created professional looking materials suitable for our learners.

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